Propelling the Zombie Narrative: "It's Never Going to Be the Same Again" in *The Walking Dead*

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> It's never going to be the same again. We're never going to be normal. Just look at us.
> ~Lori Grimes, *The Walking Dead*, Volume 1

And, "look at us" indeed. While close-ups of zombies in various degrees of decomposition and ferocity are predictably scattered throughout *The Walking Dead* comic book, the series is packed with illustrations of living faces etched in a gamut of extreme emotions: horror, grief, jealousy, blood-lust, despair. Only occasionally are those faces suffused with joy or simple contentment since only occasionally does the world now allow such emotions—but not solely because of the direct threat the zombies pose to the living. In the quotation above, Lori is commenting not on the terror she and fellow survivors continually experience nor even the violence they must remain willing to commit in order to remain survivors; rather, she is dismayed by the tension, now escalating to physical confrontation, between her husband and his best friend.[1] At this point in the phenomenal popularity of zombie narratives, it is a given that the best of them, like George Romero's prototype, always render the worst threat to humans to be themselves. *The Walking Dead*, both the comic and the television series, is very much in that tradition, its human drama fueled by what Mark Zoller Seitz calls "Zombie Values – the push-pull between community and individuality, nobility and self interest, that animates all zombie tales, even when the screen is filled with charnel-house imagery" (Seitz).

With the now seven-year run of the comic and a second season for the critically acclaimed television series airing,[2] *The Walking Dead* seems to confirm Kyle Bishop's early 2010 prediction that "the most important potential development to the zombie subgenre will likely be the serialization of large-scope storylines…taking the established zombie invasion narrative and playing it out on a larger scale and over a longer view, thereby tracking the development of the human protagonists" (198).[3] In this case, such character development is at least partially dependent on the ability of the two series to portray the emotions and values that Max Brooks' narrator in

World War Z: An Oral History calls "the human factor," which is so prevalent in Romero's films (1). In fact, both forms of *The Walking Dead* seem to take as their own Romero's mission as he articulated it in a recent interview: "My stories have always been people stories, the zombies are an annoyance. It's all about people, how they address the situation, or fail to address it" (Eggertson).

Like all zombie narratives, *The Walking Dead* features a monster whose origin is in the New World rather than the Old and in folklore and film rather than literature,[4] but it is additionally unique in that the television series is an adaptation of a comic book series, which is itself a kind of extended adaptation of the familiar story of so many zombie films, and neither series shows any sign yet of drawing to an end. All this singularity provides an excellent opportunity to examine how a narrative in two visual media constructs its zombiefied world through both employing and innovating on the protocols of the horror genre in general and the zombie narrative in particular. For the most part, the following essay will leave the figure of the zombie itself to the many critics currently advancing sophisticated readings of this monster with seemingly limitless metaphorical and reflective powers. Focusing on the "people stories" of the two series instead, I hope to demonstrate how the human struggle to hold on to the "normal" or find something with which to replace it propels both the narrative and character development, a movement all the more pronounced given the radical open-endedness of each series.

Noel Carroll's theory of the horror genre's "discovery plot"—with its four movements of onset, discovery, confirmation, and confrontation—provides a useful means to trace how *The Walking Dead* both conforms to and elaborates on a common generic plot structure (99). According to Carroll, the monster's presence is established for the audience in the onset, which is followed by the discovery movement when characters learn of the monster's existence. The onset movement of *The Walking Dead* is a brief sequence marked by signs of devastation already created by the monster and noticed simultaneously by the audience and the protagonist: both the comic panels and the television cameras follow Rick Grimes stumbling down eerily silent hospital halls littered with gurneys, debris, and then bodies. Audience and protagonist also discover the monster's existence together when Rick nears the barred doors to the hospital cafeteria and experiences his shocking first encounter with zombies, in the comic revealing his horrified confusion by screaming, "Can't you understand?" at one of the ghouls reaching out for him.[5] In lieu of such a direct encounter, the television episode features instead an overhead long shot of Rick, zombie-like himself, shambling through the hospital emergency exit past row upon row of sheet-covered corpses, each with a red blossom over its head.[6]

Rick's incomprehension in both cases is due to the coma that has prevented him for experiencing the beginning of the zombie apocalypse, and it is intensified when, upon leaving the hospital, he discovers a leg-less zombie (referred to as "bicycle girl" in the DVD extras because of a nearby bicycle that Rick uses to pedal home) and can only recoil in horror as it crawls toward him. In fact, Carroll's confirmation movement of the discovery plot—during which other

characters are convinced of the existence of the monster—can only begin in *The Walking Dead* when Rick meets other survivors, a father and son (Morgan and Dwayne) who tell him what they can of the nature of "walkers." Since the confirmation movement also entails characters acknowledging the full "proportions of the mortal danger at hand," much of the first volume of the comic and the first episode of the television series necessarily involves Rick coming to grips with the zombiefied world to which he has awoken (Carroll 101). In neither version is the confirmation movement fully realized for Rick or the reader/viewer until he later enters Atlanta, the highway littered with debris and abandoned vehicles, the city itself first empty of all but trash and then bursting (literally from around the corner) with the walking dead.

Carroll describes the final movement of the discovery plot as the point at which "humanity marches out to meet its monster and the confrontation generally takes the form of a debacle"; as in other zombie narratives, the human characters in *The Walking Dead* can hardly be said to "march"—more often, they can only react against the zombies attacking—but "debacle" is certainly the common outcome of the many confrontations (102). While Carroll allows the likelihood of such multiple confrontations in horror narratives, the discovery plot of zombie narratives features confrontations among humans as well as those between humans and monster. Rises in the action, thus, occur with each attack of the flesh-eaters *and* each conflict among the humans themselves, and falls in the action are marked by surviving (or not) each attack and conflict. The series form of *The Walking Dead*, with its "already episodic, sequential style," thus even further prolongs—or, rather, multiplies—the confrontation movement (Pool).

The creator of the comic, Robert Kirkman, has described the recurring pattern of rises and falls in the action that functions as a "road map":

> [T]he main points of the book were all in place at the start of the series…..[Once] it was clear that we'd be around for a while, my mind just sort of exploded with possibilities. So at this point…. I've got, like, ten or so big landmark events and getting to them and setting them up has a lot of little specific things that have to happen, so I don't know what issue things will fall in or even what order some of the things will happen in, but it's all just a matter of plugging in the events and working toward them. (Comic Book Resources)

Because the comic is now over 80 issues in length, it must necessarily contain many smaller narrative arcs, and so too, given its serial nature, does the television program. Writer/director Frank Darabont summarizes the television series in a metaphor that simply extends Kirkman's road map—"Kirkman's path is the template, but the series takes detours, expanding the narrative"—and implicitly describes the show's first season in similar terms: episode #2 contains a "frantic energy," #3 "slows down a bit," #4 contains a "surprise," and #5 takes "a radical detour from the comic book" because he felt there

was a need "to see what's going on with the government" (Constantine). From this, too, one can see that the further the season advances, the more the television series detours from the comic book plot, changes that both Kirkman and Darabont deem necessary because, among other reasons, fans of the comic would otherwise find no surprises in the television series. Ultimately, however, both series work to give their zombie narrative "a longer, more lived-in form" suitable to the "slow-creeping dread of suspense" stimulated by the menace of zombies.[7]

Since the zombies' primary menace is in their numbers, they stimulate that dread not so much as antagonists as they do by possessing, even embodying the very environment through which they shamble. The resulting generic protocol of an apocalyptic backdrop, not surprisingly, calls for "the collapse of societal infrastructures," which marks the settings of nearly all zombie narratives (Bishop 19). In *The Walking Dead*, the medical infrastructure is the first we see devastated (just as it is in Danny Boyle's *28 Days Later*), emphasizing the transformation of the hospital from a site for healing the sick to one for preserving the dead. On his trek home, Rick finds the residential infrastructure eroding as well, with lawns grown wild and houses deserted. Later when he arrives in Atlanta with its highways gridlocked by abandoned vehicles, it is clear that the breakdown is complete. While the comic suggests that little remains of a government infrastructure by showing only empty signs of it, the television series expands on one of those signs—an abandoned military tank, which appears in only one panel in the comic—in order to demonstrate just how meaningless the concept of military order has become. When Rick takes temporary shelter in the tank, it instantly becomes one of the claustrophobic spaces so common in the horror genre, with tight close-ups of the dead soldiers in it and quick cuts to Rick's panic-stricken face. The television series adds another space for the same sort of effect: Atlanta's Center for Disease Control. As the doors to the center open to admit the group of survivors, the light that pours out seems the very beacon of hope they need, but within the time frame of the final episode of the first season, its cavernous space acquires all the claustrophobia of a death trap, literally, since once its energy is drained, it is programmed to explode. In short, the city belongs to the dead; as Martin Rogers argues, albeit for the setting of London in *28 Days Later*, "what once ordered, now disorders….. [T]here are no boundaries for the survivors that would allow them to continue in any 'human' state….. [T]he only way for the human to survive is to leave the city" (128-129).

Initially contrasting with the city is the countryside, where Rick early on joins fellow survivors—including his wife, son, and best friend—at a campsite that works as an open-air version of what Tim Cavanaugh calls the "geographical constant" established by Romero's films to put characters "in an isolated outpost" (Cavenaugh). The parked cars and pitched tents, circled around folding chairs and clotheslines laden with drying t-shirts, suggest all the accoutrements of an extended family camping vacation—all, that is, but the silhouette of an armed man perched atop of the camper van in nearly every panel or shot of the camp. In fact, the only scene in

which a guard is not posted is one that begins in a rare moment of calm; against a backdrop of night sky,[8] the survivors are gathered around a campfire, eating fish caught by the two sisters, Amy and Andrea, and sharing "before" stories, the poignancy of which is ensured by the ordinariness of those pre-apocalyptic lives. The easy camaraderie of the scene, with the firelight drawing the survivors together, is savagely broken in one of the purely mundane moments that the horror genre exploits so often: as teenaged Amy heads for the camper and asks if they're out of toilet paper, a zombie appears from the darkness to attack her. The chaotic violence that ensues as more zombies suddenly materialize is emphasized by the glaring white blasts of gunfire in the comic through eight pages of panels that contrast with the previously peaceful firelight and highlight the faces of the terrified or determined living.[9] The mise-en-scène and events of this sequence in the television episode are nearly identical until one of its detours comes into play. In the comic, a mere four, relatively small panels portray Andrea shooting Amy before the girl can change into a walker, but the television episode fully exploits the visual power of the emotions created by the scenario: close-up shot/reverse shots of the grief-stricken Andrea and the dying, then dead Amy are cut with shots of the others watching in horror.

Of course, the zombie attack initiates this transformation of a safe place into a dead one; what drives the narrative and the character development, however, is the aftermath, the moral dilemmas that result, especially in terms of how the living dispose of the dead.[10] The television episode (the program's fourth) ends with the survivors grouped around the sisters, a tableau picked up early in the next episode, when it is now morning, and still Andrea gazes into her dead sister's face. Rebuffing the others' attempts to both console and warn her, Andrea waits for the inevitable before pulling the trigger: Amy "turning" and reaching for Andrea's face, a nicely ambiguous gesture that at once seems a last human attempt to caress her sister and a first zombie attempt to snatch at its prey. Cuts from Andrea's vigil over her sister's body, however, feature her comrades disposing of the other bodies left in the aftermath of the attack, a procedure that usually entails burning. Now, though, some of the corpses are those of their friends, and clearly the sentiment of the majority is that of Glen, who insists, "Our people go over there [gesturing away from the fire]. We don't burn them, we bury them." Even more telling is the survivors' response when they realize that another of their own has been bitten but is still alive. As the music rises, all but Andrea surround the doomed Jim, who swings a shovel and pleads, "I'm okay," with the camera panning across everyone's face before the screen briefly goes black.[11] When the action renews, Jim is isolated in the background while the group discusses his fate. "Where do we draw the line?" Rick asks, to which Darryl (the only one wanting to burn all the corpses) replies, "The line's pretty clear. Zero tolerance for walkers." When Darryl moves to put that policy into action with an axe, Rick's "We don't kill the living" is accompanied with a pointed gun, a gesture not even the rather dimwitted Darryl fails to recognize as ironic.

Yet, another segment of this sequence further complicates whatever line might be drawn between living and dead. Carol, a meek

victim of spousal abuse, asks to take the first step to disposing of any corpse—an axe to the head—for her own dead husband, but she takes far more swings at his head than necessary, and the canted shots of her face register a combination of grief, horror, and what could very well be vengeance. To underscore the contrast between the ways in which Carol and Andrea treat the bodies of their loved ones, the next shot is one of Andrea gently placing a necklace around Amy's neck before the dead girl reanimates. A similar contrast is apparent in an earlier sequence featuring Rick, now armed and dressed in his sheriff's uniform, seeking out the still writhing bicycle girl while Morgan deals with another walker, his wife who died of a zombie bite. Shots of Rick striding purposefully up to the girl to tell her, "I'm sorry this happened to you," before shooting her are cross-cut with ones of Morgan propping a photograph of his wife in the window and aiming his gun at the walker she has become. As we share his point of view, she wanders out of the crosshairs, and Morgan's subsequent breakdown is immediately followed by a long shot of Rick walking away from the now motionless body of bicycle girl.

Emphasis on the characters' treatment of the dead (and soon-to-be-dead, in the case of Jim) is one of the ways by which *The Walking Dead*, as both comic and television series, adheres to the basic ethos of Romero's *Dead* films, which implicitly condemns the behavior of those who relish violence against the dead. But, the television series distinguishes itself in sheer variety of character response: Darryl is eager to burn all corpses and kill the bitten, Andrea pays loving tribute to her sister, Carol strikes back at her abuser, Morgan cannot bear to shoot the body that now bears little resemblance to his beloved wife, and Rick goes out of way to give a stranger what he perceives as a mercy killing. The television series protagonist even extends his tendency to respect the dead to the truly dead. Hypothesizing that the walkers will not attack what doesn't smell like the living, Rick convinces his comrades that smearing the remains of a corpse on him and Glen will allow them safe passage through the zombie-infested streets. Before the first axe hits, Rick stops the group to check the identification on the body and thus pay homage: "Wayne Dunlap…he used to be like us" (to which Glen adds, "he was an organ donor"). . . .

Most of these scenarios featuring the living's treatment of the dead—nearly all of which occur in the first couple of episodes—are detours that the television series takes from the comic template. The situational ethics at work in the comic are much more concentrated on the living's treatment of each other, demonstrating, as Mathers says of *Night of the Living Dead*, that the "real monsters, the ones that pose the most danger, are the hobgoblins we face every day. Jealousy. Selfishness. Anger" (Mathers). Nowhere is the danger of human emotion more overt than in the first volume, which draws to a shocking conclusion when Shane, enraged that Rick's return has broken up his affair with Lori, threatens to kill Rick. Before the unarmed Rick can defend himself, his eight-year-old son shoots and kills Shane, and the consequences are immediately evident. "It's not the same as killing the dead ones, Daddy," Carl cries, to which Rick

replies in the final full-page illustration of father, son, and corpse, "It never should be, son." Thus, a character who seems to belong to the core group of characters is quickly dispatched—not by zombies, but by a child saving his father's life. From here on, readers of the comic are implicitly warned, no one is safe from those hobgoblins of our own making.

In keeping Shane alive, however, the television series still adheres to the comic book's template in that this revision, too, is afforded the opportunity to emphasize the living's treatment of each other. The television series allows Shane's character to reveal a complexity not possible in his short-lived comic book presence and uses him—and his feelings for both Lori and Rick—to help develop the other characters and to violate viewers' expectations of formulaic plots. As Seitz noted after the third episode had been aired,

> The first time the show cuts away from Rick's post-apocalyptic re-awakening to show that Lori has become the lover of Rick's best friend, Shane (Jon Bernthal), we're conditioned by a lifetime of B-movie shorthand to think of Shane as an opportunist and Lori as a betrayer. But by episode two, it's clear that their sexual relationship grew out of knowing each other as friends for many years, and that they would not have become lovers if they'd known Rick was still alive. By episode three, Rick returns, and Lori and Shane end their relationship instantly. (Seitz)

In suggesting that their relationship is more than the one-time sexual encounter we see in the comic book, the television series posits higher stakes for its Shane as he struggles to control his feelings for Lori and retain his friendship with Rick. His moments of weakness—briefly aiming a rifle at his friend from a distance and savagely beating the wife-abuser—are unsettling, but also understandable signs of his pain. The stakes are higher for the other two parts of this triangle as well. Shane's objections (no matter how dubious their motivation) to Rick's various plans carry weight, making Rick's struggle to know what the right thing to do that much more difficult, especially since he is unambiguously grateful to Shane for protecting his family in his absence. What is more, Lori's fear that Shane will tell Rick of their affair is matched by her anger at him, which the television program allows to fester throughout the season; like Lori, viewers suspect that Shane lied to her when he claimed Rick had died in the hospital.

The prologue to the sixth episode forces viewers to modify that judgment; in this well-placed flashback, Shane vainly struggles to transfer his unconscious friend to a gurney as soldiers patrol the hospital halls shooting at anything that moves. Only when he asks Rick for a sign and searches for a heart beat—and detects neither—does he give up, pushing the gurney against the door in a last-ditch attempt to prevent both the soldiers and the walking dead from entering the room. Providing this kind of "new information that fleshes out scenarios [that seem] cut-and-dried" is, as Seitz suggests, a complication of audience response not always found in the horror genre, which more often "encourages the viewer to ridicule or condemn the characters for making decisions out of ignorance or sentiment."[12]

But just as the hospital flashback may cause viewers to sympathize with Shane, the same episode complicates that response as well. During a brief moment of calm in the short-lived sanctuary of the CDC, when Lori repulses a drunken Shane trying to tell her what happened in the hospital and confess his love, he tries to rape her, stopped only when she fights back; Lori's panic is certainly not assuaged by an equally drunken (and clueless) Rick who later assures her that "you don't have to be afraid anymore. We're safe here." Of course, Lori does have something to fear, no one is safe at the CDC, and viewers have no idea what the fate of Shane may be in the upcoming season.

Without any of the social structures that might have offered them a sense of security, characters repeatedly ponder their treatment of each other. During Rick's first visit to Atlanta, for example, he asks why, at the risk of his own life, Glen rescues him, and Glen replies that his motivation was a "foolish, naive hope" that if he were in the same situation, someone might do the same for him. Most often, characters' actions demonstrate how their decisions are affected by conflicting emotions and values, and those decisions in turn affect other people.[13] A scene from the television series aptly illustrates this chain in which each character is a link. On a city rooftop, Darryl's brother Merle threatens T-Dog, an African-American member of their group; Rick handcuffs the racist to a pipe, but when the group must soon run for their lives, T-Dog drops the handcuff key down a drain. His shocked face corroborates what the camera has already shown us, that dropping the key was indeed an accident. Despite the fact that he has little cause to care what happens to Merle, T-Dog twice does his best to rectify his mistake: as he leaves the rooftop, he padlocks the door shut so that the invading zombies can't reach Merle, and later he volunteers to join the party returning to Atlanta to rescue Merle. Rick, too, joins that party—leads it, in fact—even though both Lori and Shane object that Merle isn't worth the risk. While Rick argues that he can't let such a death happen to any human being, the nobility of that sentiment is tempered by another, more practical reason for returning to Atlanta: to retrieve the bag he dropped there that contains much needed guns and the radio set he had promised Morgan to use. Only when Rick claims he owes a debt to Morgan and needs the radio to warn him and his son about the dangers in Atlanta does Lori relent in her objections.[14]

In focusing on such instances of situational ethics, *The Walking Dead* employs a strategy often used in horror narratives, that of drawing on conventions of other genres. With a Gary Cooper figure trying to do the right thing as its protagonist, the series most overtly references classic western films and their iconic characters. When Glen rescues Rick from a crowd of zombies in Atlanta, he glances at the stranger's police uniform and quips, "nice moves there, Clint Eastwood. You the new sheriff, come riding in to clean up the town?",[15] and later another survivor warns Rick that "the key to survival is not shooting up the streets like it's the OK Corral." Such references, as Alyssa Rosenberg points out, indicate the self-awareness of the series, which is nowhere more evident than in the long shot taken nearly verbatim from the comic and providing the graphic for the

DVD cover: Rick astride a horse, hat and rifles prominent in profile, riding down the empty side of the interstate highway, past deserted cars piled up on the left toward the cityscape looming in the background (Rosenberg).

Images referencing western iconography are more than mere winks to a hip audience, however. While the sheriff's hat is a reminder of a time now gone forever, it also seems to connote the hope and confidence the survivors so desperately need. Despite his earlier sarcasm, for example, Glen risks his own life to stop to pick up Rick's hat, and it is telling that once Rick has donned his uniform and hat, he is able to act calmly and decisively when initially the sight of the mangled body of bicycle girl paralyzes him. The sheriff's hat takes on even more significance in the comic when Carl begins wearing it after killing Shane, and continues to do so throughout the series thus far. While wearing his father's hat may simply be a kind of security blanket for the boy, it also suggests that a childhood has been killed, and Carl's bleak prospects are accentuated by the considerably darker style of artist Charlie Adlard, who took over the illustrations at this point in the series. Thus, the Stetson does far more than provide a handily concise sign for the order that the sheriff's uniform once denoted.

In fact, *The Walking Dead* fully appropriates western conventions to accomplish its narrative goals, most directly in developing Rick's character as the protagonist and the others' relationship to him (Rogers 123). As Rosenberg notes, "the essence of a Western is the void and the unpleasant things that lurk in it.…[S]ometimes the vacancy is moral, a place where men and women have passed beyond the rule of law, and the rule of law scrabbles to regain its hold".[16] Into such a void strides Rick, who in the comic claims, "I may be a cop, but I don't let rules blind me to what's right and wrong," with a confidence that is shaken repeatedly in later issues. In both series, however, Rick inspires confidence in others, a point made explicit in the comic when Dale, the older man who has been keeping the group together, tells Lori that "Rick is the backbone of the group," making them all "feel safe." A sequence in the television series features an actual showdown, which culminates in a meditation on the qualities of a leader. In search of his bag of weapons, Rick and his comrades encounter another group of survivors, who at first seem the kind of immoral cutthroats to which the comic readers have become accustomed....After an old woman diffuses the groups' armed stand-off, however, the leader of the new group is revealed to be the janitor of a nursing home whose patients were deserted by most of the staff, and Guillermo's "gang members" are merely remaining staff members and relatives gathered to protect and care for the old folks. Guillermo explains how "survival keeps the crew busy," and "that's worth something.…The people here all look to me now, I don't even know why." Rick's reply, "because they can," suggests that Guillermo's group recognizes him as someone who has taken responsibility for their safety, not unlike how Rick himself is viewed by his group.

That leadership position comes with a price, of course. As in so many westerns (and police dramas), Rick's identification with his for-

mer job causes tension in his marriage. Clad in his police uniform even though he could as easily wear street clothes, Rick insists on returning to Atlanta after spending less than a day with the wife and child he had believed were lost to him. Lori is understandably upset, but clearly she is accustomed to Rick acting according to his own code, whether or not she approves.[17] When the campsite is attacked in his absence, Rick wants Lori to assure him he was right in leaving (which she does not), and he wonders why the others can't realize the wisdom of heading for the CDC. Lori responds, "Look at their faces, look at mine. We're all terrified…..Tell me something with certainty," but his only reply, after a long pause, is "I love you. That's all I got." Ironically, that seems quite a bit in light of the pre-apocalypse scene opening the series in which Rick confesses to Shane that Lori has grown frustrated with his inability to share his feelings, even wondering if "you care about us at all."

In fact, as the first season advances, it increasingly bears out Seitz's reading that Rick is "less a saintly do-gooder than a psychologically damaged, compulsive crusader" (Seitz). Rick displays that compulsiveness when he takes responsibility that isn't his to take, and the doomed Jim's situation is a case in point. As he sickens, Jim pleads with Rick, who insists that he go with them to Atlanta's CDC: "I just want to be with my family [killed by walkers]. Leave me here. Now that's on me, my decision, not your failure." Rick is ready to act on his own belief that Jim is only delusional until both Lori and Dale agree that choosing to die alone—and to "resurrect" alone as well[18]—is indeed Jim's decision alone to make. The psychological damage Rick has suffered from his sense of responsibility is on display in the same episode five when he "talks" on a dysfunctional radio; crouched alone on a hilltop with the dawn-lit cityscape glowing in the background like the Emerald City of Oz, he clutches the handset as he tries to contact Morgan to tell him that Atlanta is "not what they promised….It belongs to the dead now."[19] The repetition of this exact scenario later in the episode—albeit this time with the message to Morgan that the group is heading out to Atlanta anyway—underscores the pressure the tight-lipped Rick is under among those he is leading. Once inside the center, Rick confesses to its sole occupant, Dr. Jenner, that he has been unable to share with his wife and son the pessimism he has felt about their survival chances. Rather than the result of rational thinking, however, his new-found optimism at the CDC seems to stem more from willful ignorance of all the signs at the center, including the bodies of hundreds of soldiers surrounding it and Jenner's cool reception of the survivors, pointing to its inadequacy as the sanctuary he so hopes it will be.

The CDC episode, the most radical detour from the comic thus far, gives the first season its climax; it also foregrounds the characters' motivation for going there as the desperate search for what all survivors in zombie narratives need: food, shelter, and information.[20] *The Walking Dead*, however, posits hope as at least equally important, and the episode juxtaposes the group's need to hope against the inability of the scientist—and thus the entire governmental infrastructure—to offer any. Once Jenner is persuaded to let them inside, he asks, "What do you want?" to which Rick replies, "A

chance." Jenner's "that's asking an awful lot these days" foreshadows his later confession that the center can do nothing to help anyone, not even provide them shelter since its depletion of energy will soon trigger its own destruction. After telling them the story of his own wife's death and reanimation, Jenner includes the group in his plan to be destroyed with the center; after all, as he reminds Rick of his own confession of hopelessness, the explosion will mean avoiding the "short, brutal life and an agonizing death" awaiting them outside. Rick's response makes Jenner relent and open the doors: "Your wife didn't have a choice. That's all we want, a choice, a chance." Along with the right to make one's own decisions, however, comes responsibility, as the last moments of the episode illustrate. Andrea, still mourning Amy's death, decides to stay with Jenner and die in the explosion; Dale, who had become attached to the sisters, refuses to leave without her: "I can't face it alone…..You don't get to do that, to come into somebody's life and make somebody care and then just check out."

With little to guide them, Rick and his group are trying desperately to hang on to distinctions between what "you don't get to do" and what they should do. In that attempt, the characters' greatest fear is that their zombiefied world has changed them for the worse; as Rick worries, if "a man like Shane" can change so much as to threaten to kill his best friend, they are all susceptible. A particularly telling conversation on the subject of change occurs in the comic book between Rick and Tyreese, a latecomer to the group, when Rick comments that "this stuff changes people….I think we've got some good people here….but honestly, I just don't know what you're thinking. To me, that's scarier than any half-rotten ghoul trying to eat my flesh." Tyreese's response comes in the form of a confession that he killed a "nice old man" who was trying to rape Tyreese's daughter: "I'm beating myself up because I don't feel bad about doing it. Yeah, the end of the world changed him, but look at how it changed me." Assumptions that human change is always the enemy, however, are belied in the television episode in which Guillermo explains that his group acted so aggressively upon first meeting Rick's because they had encountered so many plunderers. Rick assures him "that's not who we are," but when T-Dog adds that "the world has changed," Guillermo is adamant: "No. It's the same as it ever was. The weak get taken."

Guillermo's stance here—that nothing about human beings has changed—recognizes that the very concept of humanity is not as unambiguously positive as the others seem to think it is. In fact, the question Deborah Christie argues that Romero films pose seems grimly relevant here: "Why, with the consequences of humanity's *humanness* making themselves blatantly apparent all around us—global warming, resource depletion, warfare—is it so difficult to consider that we might all be, well, better off dead?" (80). Even at the more personal level at which the series characters function, it is clearly their human qualities that work against them every bit as forcefully as the walking dead do; as Pagano claims that Romero's films illustrate, "not only our corruption but our conclusion derives from within humanity, not outside it" (75). Thus, to offer any other

conclusion than the nihilistic "better off dead," the zombie narrative must posit some hope from the very same "humanness" that includes, of course, humans' capacity for change. Ultimately, as in so many zombie narratives, Rick and his group, in order to survive, must work to defeat the habits and behaviors of the pre-apocalyptic world. While it can be argued that the zombies are destroying at least the infrastructures of that world, they surely aren't struggling against "representatives of the old order" (Ahmad 137). Those must necessarily include the "corruption, ignorance, fear, or greed already exist[ing] among the living in America today" for which the zombie plague is only the logical extension (Pagano 75). The human characters in *The Walking Dead* must, therefore, work toward embracing change within themselves and with each other.

Such change is easier said than done, of course, and the open-endedness of both series ensures that thus far readers and viewers have witnessed only the difficulty of both retaining and relinquishing old concepts of normalcy. A case in point is the contradictory nature of the paranoia that increasingly influences the characters' perception of other people in the comic. The trend of the zombie subgenre has been to amplify the "suspicion, paranoia and fear of other people [that] dominate our everyday lives," a move that, in *The Walking Dead* comic where Rick's group encounters others at various points, has Rick in particular becoming increasingly distrustful of others.[21] That very paranoia, however, can become what Bishop contends is a "crucial tool for survival" in zombie narratives" (29). Indeed, a healthy dose of paranoia is often essential in the horror genre overall, but the difficulty comes in determining the shifting boundary between necessary distrustfulness—which leads characters in *The Walking Dead* comic to suspect others who indeed mean them harm—and destructive fear of others, which often consumes those same characters and leads, among other outcomes, to murder.

What then can offer the characters of *The Walking Dead* the "chance, the choice" that Rick so desperately begs of Jenner, which necessarily becomes the chance to adapt to their new world? Two possibilities are already at work in both series. The first is present from the beginning; as Rogers argues for *28 Days Later*, the characters are forming "not so much a family as a network, a social unit of interdependence and connectivity" (127). In fact, while some characters seem to present only obstacles to forming such a network, even Darryl, with his hunting experience and fearlessness, has a role in developing the necessary interdependence. Interestingly, while the comic has no equivalent for the Darryl character, Andrea early on takes the initiative to develop the rifle skills that repeatedly save others; the fact that Andrea has thus far survived over eighty issues of other major characters being killed off indicates the possible result of assuming such an active role in insuring the group's survival. By contrast, the comic's Carol, with no discernable skills to contribute, succumbs to hopelessness and commits suicide; relevant here is the regression to which characters in Romero's *Dawn of the Dead* succumb once they lose any need for productive labor (Bishop 152). The necessity for action and productive labor becomes implicitly a gender issue as well. While the women in both series early on ques-

tion the division of labor that has them on permanent laundry duty, so far the television series gives its female characters no additional responsibilities other than meal preparation and child care. Most noticeable is the fact that the television series has yet to give any woman (or child) the ability to use guns. The zombie narrative made possible by Romero's films, as Natasha Patterson has written (following in the footsteps of Robin Wood), can call everything about the old order—including the patriarchy—into question (111-112). Whether the television series creators will adhere to that part of Romero's vision—as the comic does to at least some extent—and use it to tighten the sense of connectivity among the characters is yet to be seen.

Yet to be seen as well is whether the imperative to stay on the move—which appears to be a weakness—will render the characters' new kind of social unit impossible or will become an actual strength. Speaking of *Land of the Dead*, Pagano writes that in castigating "the power structures and unthinking habits of late twentieth-and early twenty-first-century America," Romero hypothesizes "an already dead country," but in emphasizing movement over destination, he allows "for the possibility that a certain lack of closure, or perhaps an ethics of movement, may revive us" (85). An ethics of movement seems to be at work in *The Walking Dead* as well, especially in the comic with its characters' multiple failed attempts to put down roots, and the lack of closure in both series enables their pattern of continual movement. Moving on, open-ended, *The Walking Dead* and its characters—who are, in so many ways, already themselves the walking dead and come to recognize that—illustrate the "deferred space between catastrophe and posthistory where the march of time begins to shamble" that Stephanie Boluk and Wylie Lenz argue marks the contemporary zombie narrative:

> The endless deferral and refusal to cross this threshold serves as the precondition for the serial renewal of apocalyptic desire. . . .These almost-end times stretch out, and those that live in them live, necessarily, after an end but before another end. A new generation of humanity emerges in each of these shambling epochs, and the nth end: Generation Z. (12-13)

Rick, Andrea, and all the others who manage to stay alive from issue to issue, episode to episode, may lament that they are "never going to be normal" again, but as members of Generation Z, they keep the end-times at bay, and their struggle to find something with which to replace the "normal" drives the narrative .

Ultimately, then, as in so many zombie narratives, Rick and his group, in order to survive, must work to defeat the habits and behaviors of the pre-apocalyptic world. The human characters in *The Walking Dead* must, therefore, work toward embracing change within themselves and with each other. While unfortunately it is "humanness," corruption, greed, fear, that creates a zombie plague which destroys the world in the first place, the zombie narrative also posits hope in that very same "humanness." The thing that enables humanity to survive, even in an apocalypse, is that great human capacity for change.

Notes

[1] All quotations from and references to the comic series (the pages of which are unnumbered) are from Robert Kirkman, *The Walking Dead* (Berkeley, CA: Image Comics, Inc, 2003-present).

[2] Editor's note: since this essay was written, *The Walking Dead* has entered its fifth season on AMC and the popularity of both comic and television series amply confirms Bishop's observation.

[3] Bishop forecasts three other directions the zombie narrative can take: "remakes, sequels, loving tributes . . . [that will] serve to introduce the next generation to the subgenre's roots"; "apocalyptic tales of infection and infestation"; "zombedies that will push the subgenre into entirely unexpected directions" (198).

[4] As Bishop notes, "the zombie is curiously unique because it began its infamous career in folklore, drama, and cinema—not in literature, like vampires, ghosts, werewolves, and golems. The zombie is also a singular and important figure in American historical and cultural studies, as it is the only canonical movie monster to originate in the New World" (31).

[5] The pre-credits sequence of the opening episode features the onset of the discovery plot: Rick walks toward a cluster of abandoned vehicles and discovers a little girl, whom he initially believes is human, but discovers is a "walker." Since the apocalypse is obviously in full swing, and Rick is already dressed in his sheriff's uniform, however, this scene does not represent the discovery movement. All of the season's other pre-credits sequences feature an actual part of the narrative or, in an instance I discuss later, function as a flashback. The episode's proper first scene itself works almost like a flashback since its pre-apocalypse setting features Rick and Shane in their patrol car discussing Rick's marital problems before the fateful call that leads to Rick being shot and thus hospitalized.

[6] All quotations and references to the television series are from *The Walking Dead*, directed by Frank Darabont, AMC Film Holdings and Anchor Bay Entertainment, 2011.

[7] Nathan Pensky writes that **"**one of the great strengths of television as a storytelling device is its episodic, yet indefinitely framed sense of time. Television's season format allows for longer-form storytelling, longer still for stories that span the length of an entire series, while individual episodes allow for more focused moment. . . . While it may be early to speak definitively about *The Walking Dead* as a series, the show has already capitalized considerably on this great strength of the television medium, as well as expanded significantly on the corpus of the zombie tale (pun intended). AMC's prestige monster outing seems all the more expansive and detail-oriented, and thus more thrilling, for being played through a medium that allows for slowly built moments of suspense. . ."

[8] In the comic, snow is also falling, something the television series eschews, most likely because it was shot on location in Atlanta during the summer. In the comic, however, the increasing cold is one of Rick's arguments in trying to convince Shane that leaving their open-air camp is preferable to waiting for the government to show up in the form of the military.

[9] In addition to conveying the darker of human emotions, the aesthetics of the comic's black and white color scheme render the violence portrayed particularly effective. As Jamie Russell suggests, the monochrome look of the comic complements the "dramatic, claustrophobic storyline" (186).

[10] "Disposal" is, of course, two-fold, beginning with the violence necessary to terminate the walking dead; and, as Hamish Thompson observes, "the sharpest moral challenge often arises when a character is faced with the realization of the altered state of a loved one and the choice of either terminating the loved one, who is thus transformed, or being transformed

oneself" (29).

[11] Watching the series on DVD makes this black-screen transition seem an interesting effect that helps to create suspense, when in fact a commercial break in the original airing necessitated it.

[12] Seitz further pays the series the compliment of admitting that after the third episode he "didn't know quite what to make of any of the major characters"; this corresponds to remarks that Kirkman has made in terms of the unpredictability of the characters: "If I had Rick cut off his son's head in the next issue, that would seem way out of character, but….. I never show you what Rick is thinking. For all readers know, Rick has been planning on cutting Carl's head off for years….. Frankly, anyone is capable of anything…." (*Comicbookresources.com* interview).

[13] Seitz writes that *The Walking Dead* shows "the complexity of the human animal, how the definition of what's moral and right changes depending on the situation, and how decisions are affected by the emotions people feel when they're under pressure (and the holes in their knowledge).

[14] As Seitz notes, "Rick's laid-back righteousness can seem like self-righteousness, and Lori's barely-contained looks of frustration and terror suggest that she's seen him act this way before, and is letting him have his way not because she thinks he's right, but because she knows this is a battle she can't win."

[15] Glen also references *Butch Cassidy and the Sundance Kid*: when Rick is doubtful that the zombies won't get them when they jump from a fire escape ladder, Glen quips, "It'll be fall the fall that kills us."

[16] Rosenberg gives equal time to the location of the television series: "*The Walking Dead* takes Atlanta as seriously as a beacon of hope and a symbol of despair as *Gone With the Wind* did; the power of Rick's hope for Atlanta, where he has been told the Centers for Disease Control is developing a cure, is as powerful as Scarlett O'Hara's hope that Rhett Butler, in jail in Atlanta, will lend her the money to save Tara. Rick points out to his fellow survivors that the apocalypse has erased racial difference. 'There are no niggers, no inbred, dumb-as-shit-white trash fools, neither,' he tells them. 'Just white meat and dark meat.' Given the role the Civil War plays in so many Western stories… it's fitting that one of the best recent Westerns set in the present day should return to the site of one of the Civil War's most famous campaigns."

[17] Seitz argues that when Rick insists on returning to Atlanta less than a day after being reunited with his family, "Lori's barely contained looks of frustration and terror suggest that she's seen him act this way before, and is letting him have his way not because she thinks he's right, but because she knows this is a battle she can't win."

[18] Since Jim refuses the gun that Rick offers him as the group leaves him propped up against a tree, his "I want to join my family"—who are all now presumably walkers—is in marked contrast to responses of characters in other zombie narratives who invariably prefer termination to "resurrection."

[19] The group puts its faith in the "Oz" at the CDC, only to discover that the "great and powerful" scientists are anything but that. Thus, the shimmer of the cityscape itself in this scene seems a creation of Rick's wishful thinking. In a later issue of the comic, Rick's mental state has deteriorated to near psychosis, particularly after Lori is killed when he "talks" to her on a telephone as dead as she is (and the radio is in the television series).

[20] As Rogers observes about *28 Days Later*, "equally important to the search for food is information, clearly a valuable commodity for the subjects of an 'information society'" (126).

[21] Kevin M. Brettauer, in reviewing the twelfth volume of the comic, notes that an "apprehensive, stress-filled Rick," suffering an "obvious Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder," illustrates "how desperate survivors of great catastrophes will go to pretend to be normal in public."

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